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AUTHOR Foucar-Szocki, Diane; Bolt, Les
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ABSTRACT

A stratified random sample of Virginia's 4,000 employers with over 100 employees was surveyed about workplace-based foundational basic skills (oral and written communication, reading, math, thinking skills, teamwork, English proficiency, and basic computer literacy). A total of 446 surveys were sent with a usable response rate of 18 percent. Findings indicated that employers recognize in both current employees and applicants some basic skill needs; skill needs are exacerbated by new technology, new products, and changing markets, requiring increased performance from all employees; nearly 95 percent of workers have a general educational development (GED) credential or high school diploma; 80 percent of respondents offer tuition reimbursement; the perceived quality of training sources available (community colleges, colleges and universities, private vendors, adult learning centers, and GED programs) varied widely by region; respondents viewed applicant skills less favorably than current employee skills; and learning at work was an investment most often made in the most educated employees. (Eighteen figures illustrate respondents by region and organizational size; functions performed by sites; percentage of tuition reimbursement; pre-employment assessment; full-time employees; average turnover; with diploma or GED; basic skills of employees and applicants; basic skills by region; likelihood of training in next 24 months; use of formal in-house training; use of local training provider; quality of local training and educational services; and impact of local business climate.) (YLB)

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Workforce Improvement Network

Workforce Improvement Network
2000 Survey of Virginia Employers

Diane Foucar-Szocki, Ed.D.
Les Bolt, Ph.D.

In our ongoing efforts to acquire and share useful information about the foundational basic skills needs of non-management and non-professional employees, the Workforce Improvement Network initiated its *2000 Survey of Virginia Employers*. An executive summary was published in our fall 2000 Update. Here we report the full results of the survey and offer some observations and recommendations for further research and development of workplace-based foundational basic skills in Virginia.

Background Information

In March 2000, the Workforce Improvement Network surveyed a stratified random sample of Virginia's 4000 employers with over 100 employees. A total of 446 surveys were sent with an overall response rate of 20% and a usable response rate of 18%. Figure 1 (*pdf format*) shows respondents by region. Northern Virginia includes respondents from the Shenandoah Valley. Figure 2 shows the respondents by organizational size. The mean number of employees for responding organizations was 908 with a median of 200. The largest organizations were in Tidewater and Northern Virginia and the smallest in Western Virginia.

Figure 3 shows the functions performed by respondent sites. Fifty-five percent of responding sites were headquarters. Sites also served most often as administrative centers, customer service centers and computer data centers. Most respondent sites serve a variety of purposes and functions with no distinction between large and small institutions. Respondents could check as many function descriptors as applied.

The large majority of respondents, over 80% (Figure 4), offer tuition reimbursement for employees with the most common pattern being reimbursement based upon specific criteria, most likely keyed to institution goals and objectives. Large institutions, with greater than 200 full time employees, were significantly more likely to offer tuition reimbursement.

Over 60% of respondents conduct pre-employment assessments (Figure 5), with Western Virginia respondents using pre-employment assessments significantly more than Central Virginia or Northern Virginia respondents.

Respondent organizations had a median of 200 full time employees (Figure 6), with the largest median in Central Virginia and the lowest in the Tidewater area. Small organizations, those with fewer than 200 employees, had about 70% of their workforce as full time. Large institutions, those with over 200 employees, had almost 90% of their employees as full time. About 10% of respondent workforces were union with small companies slightly more likely to be unionized. The average workweek for all respondents was 36.6 hours with large companies having slightly longer work weeks, 7.8 hours, spread

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over more shifts. The majority of employees, over 50% were non-exempt, hourly employees involved in production. Other employees are spread over a variety of functions with no real difference between large and small organizations. The annual turnover rate is between 9% and 14%, with average turnover at 8.24% (Figure 7).

Current Basic Skills of Employees and Applicants

Overall, nearly 95% of current employees were reported to have their GED or a High School diploma, with just over 91% achieving this level of credential in Western Virginia (Figure 8). When asking about foundational basic skills the survey included oral and written communication, reading, math, thinking skills, teamwork, English proficiency and basic computer literacy. Respondents felt that current employees had adequate foundational basic skills but were not as strong in technical skill areas involving computer literacy and software skills. Applicants were perceived as marginally adequate in foundational basic skills but were weak in technical skills involving computer literacy and software skills (Figure 9). There were no real differences between large and small companies. Differences by region are not significant, but interesting. The Central Region (Figure 10) reports current employees English proficiency as less than applicants, with the greatest current employee skill proficiency in teamwork and applicants least proficient in this area.

In Western Virginia (Figure 11), the gap between current employees and applicants is less pronounced than in other regions of the state. Current employees are perceived as in greatest need in the foundational basic skill areas of computers, written communication, reading comprehension and thinking skills. Applicants are reported as least proficient in math.

The Tidewater region respondents report both current employee and applicant greatest need in the foundational basic skill areas of math and computer literacy. Current employees are reported as adequate in English proficiency, verbal and teamwork skills (Figure 12).

Northern Virginia respondents report current employees as adequate in all of the foundational basic skills, including basic computer skills. Applicants are perceived as least proficient in team skills, written communication and math (Figure 13).

Respondents were asked the likelihood that they would be providing training in the foundational basic skill areas over the next two years. Respondents indicated a fairly low likelihood of offering foundational basic skills upgrades (Figure 14). English proficiency, team skills and computer literacy were more likely to be offered than the other basic skills. Respondents in Central Virginia indicate a strong intention to offer English proficiency training. Large institutions were significantly more likely to offer basic skills upgrades in written communication and math and more technical computer software areas such as spreadsheets and accounting software than smaller organizations. As a way to help respondents distinguish between basic computer literacy and software applications for specific purposes, the survey requested information about intentions in both areas. The Workforce Improvement Network is most interested in understanding intentions related to foundational basic skill development. If you are interested in the responses related to software applications, please contact our office.

Sources for Training Needs

Over 70% of respondents have in-house training programs (Figure 15) and over 75% also use

local providers (Figure 16). Large institutions are significantly more likely to both have in-house programs (79%) and use local providers (87%). Western Virginia respondents were least likely to have a formal in-house training operation, reflective of the number of small organizations responding from Western Virginia. As a result, 80% of Western Virginia respondents report using local training providers to meet needs.

Overall, responding organizations are most likely to use in-house sources for skill upgrades, particularly in the computer skills. Other potential sources are private vendors, community colleges, adult education and literacy providers. Large organizations are much more likely to use community college and adult language and literacy programs than small organizations.

No services were viewed favorably by respondents with community colleges, colleges and universities and private vendors fairing slightly better than other services. Large organizations felt significantly more positive about adult learning centers and GED programs but those were still not viewed favorably.

Quality of training and educational sources varies greatly by region (Figure 17). Western Virginia respondents view community colleges (3.67) most favorably and literacy providers (0.60) least favorably, while Tidewater respondents rate literacy providers (3.08) second, only behind colleges and universities (3.31), with GED program services (0.46) as very poor.

Local Business Climate

Organizations saw new technology, new products and changing markets as major business impacts over the next 24 months. There were no real differences between large and small companies. Figure 18 shows responses by region.

Conclusion

Virginia employers responding to our survey recognized in both current employees and applicants some foundational basic skill needs. Foundational basic skills most in need of attention vary from region to region, but include basic computer literacy, English proficiency, team skills math, written communication and reading comprehension. Skill needs are exacerbated by new technology, new products and changing markets, requiring increased performance from all employees, including non-management and non-professional workers. Developing these skills requires prepared professionals that both understand employer requirements and can respond to the needs of the employees. To do this often requires customized curriculum that develops foundational basic skills within the context of the workplace. These programs represent new territory for adult educators who are most familiar with GED and Pre-GED focused classroom instruction.

In addition to workplace specific foundational basic skill needs, between five and ten percent of workers do not have a GED or high school diploma. Working with employers for workers to seek this credential at or through work is an opportunity for adult educators. This should be pursued vigorously throughout the Commonwealth. With eighty percent of respondents offering a tuition reimbursement program, it is our hope that GED and high school completion are part of these tuition reimbursement programs and are made known to employees. With increased emphasis from the Virginia Department of Adult Education on GED completion, a partnership between the VDOE and employer-supported tuition reimbursement programs seems a natural fit. Those employers that do not currently offer tuition reimbursement should consider adding this benefit. Additionally, workplaces with a high number of non-high school graduates can invest in customized credentialing programs to prepare workers for the GED and enhance their understanding of workplace-based skills simultaneously.

While there is a need to improve foundational basic skills at work, there is a large gap in the

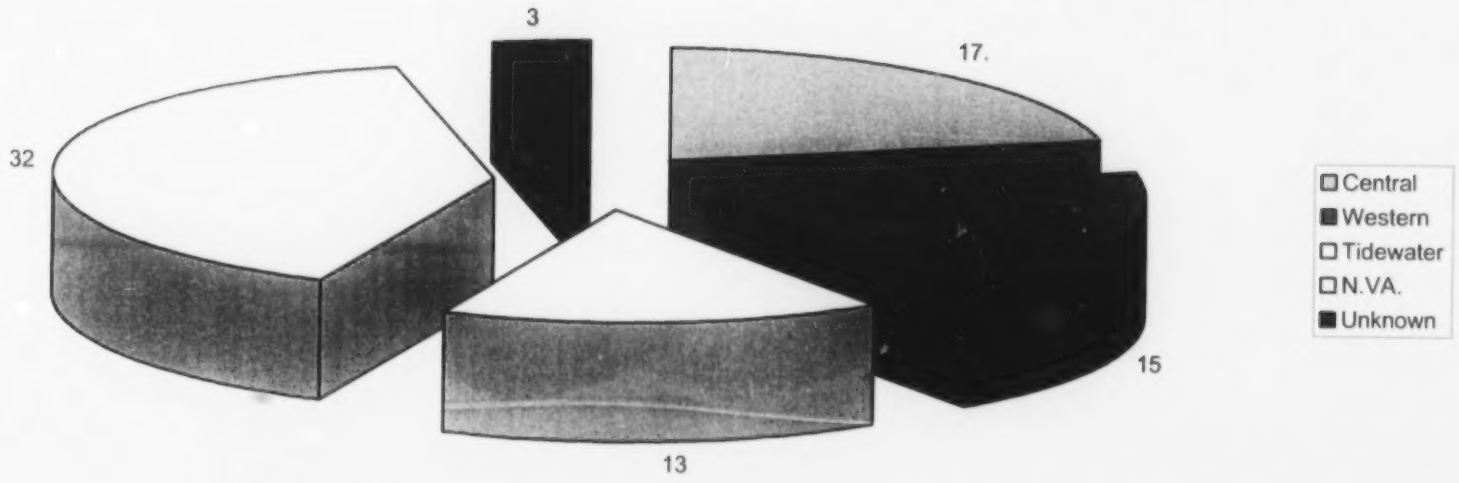
perceived quality of current sources to provide that training. Respondents are not favorably disposed to any of the sources of training, yet adult education, GED and literacy providers fare most poorly overall. Encouragement can be taken from regional differences where adult education and literacy providers are seen in a more favorable light. This suggests that programs that attend to the needs of employers and employees, working in concert with other local resources, can become a quality source for foundational basic skills training. Historically, the attention of adult education, GED and literacy providers has not been on the workplace. Increased emphasis on the importance of work and employment within our culture requires that local adult education, GED and literacy programs rethink how their services are delivered. This increased emphasis on employment suggests that providers must consider and prepare for stronger relationships with employers and employees to provide programs at and through the workplace. Additionally, implementation of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act requires increased attention by adult education, GED and literacy providers to the needs of the workplace.

Respondents viewed applicant skills less favorably than current employees. With many respondents doing pre-employment assessment, the door is opened for local programs to work with these employers to enhance the skills of these applicants. Such relationships provide value for both the employer and the applicant, where skill need and development can be met. A caution for all in the foundational basic skills arena is guarding against the unreal expectations that a six-week program alone will close the skills gap. Relationships between local adult education, GED and literacy programs and employers creates a pathway for on-going skills development. For some, this will be a long process and should be understood as such.

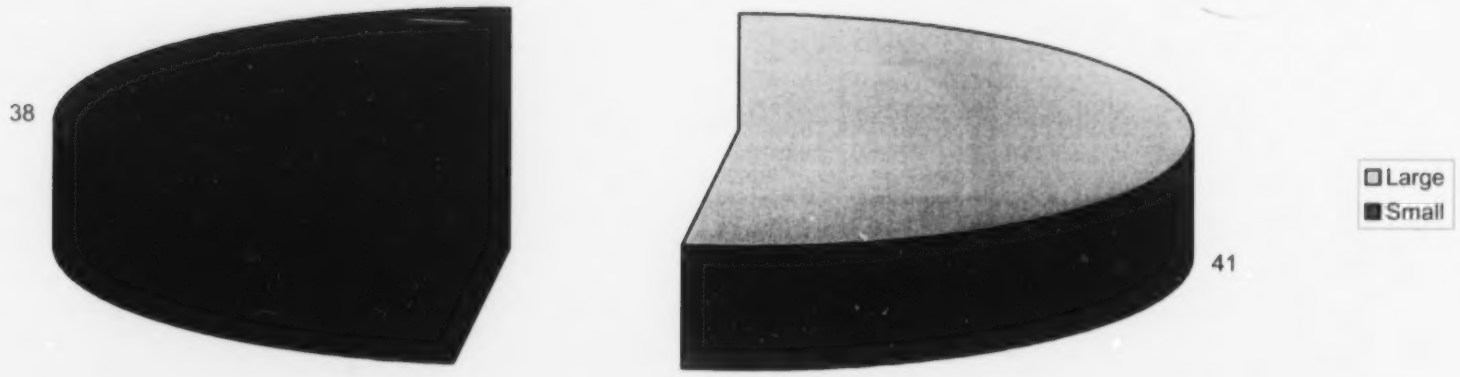
Learning at work is an investment most often made in the most educated employees. Recognizing the need for and making the investment in the less skilled and less educated worker is the next frontier for the Virginia workforce. Continuing progress requires attention to the skill needs of all employees, particularly those for whom education has not been a priority. Shifting our view to learning at work for all employees regardless of their previous level of educational attainment takes the will to recognize the need and the fortitude to make the investment. Moreover, to be successful, quality sources of training in foundational basic skills must be available to meet the needs of employers and employees. Finally, employers must be made aware that quality programs exist and are worth the investment.

Local programs, with support from state and federal monies, must recognize their obligation to provide quality workplace-based services for employers in their area. The state must continue to invest in and require appropriate professional and program development that equips adult language and literacy providers with the skills, knowledge and resources to meet the foundational basic skill needs of their local citizens at or through the workplace. The era of exclusively classroom-based program delivery is gone. A new era of anywhere, anyplace, just in time, customized programming is here now. Taken in concert with the traditional GED credentialing system, the opportunity to bring lifelong learning to Virginia's entire workforce exists if we have the fortitude, imagination and resources to pursue it. It is imperative that adult educators and the adult language and literacy system recognize and respond to workforce development in ways that are effective and responsible, leaving no Virginian behind.

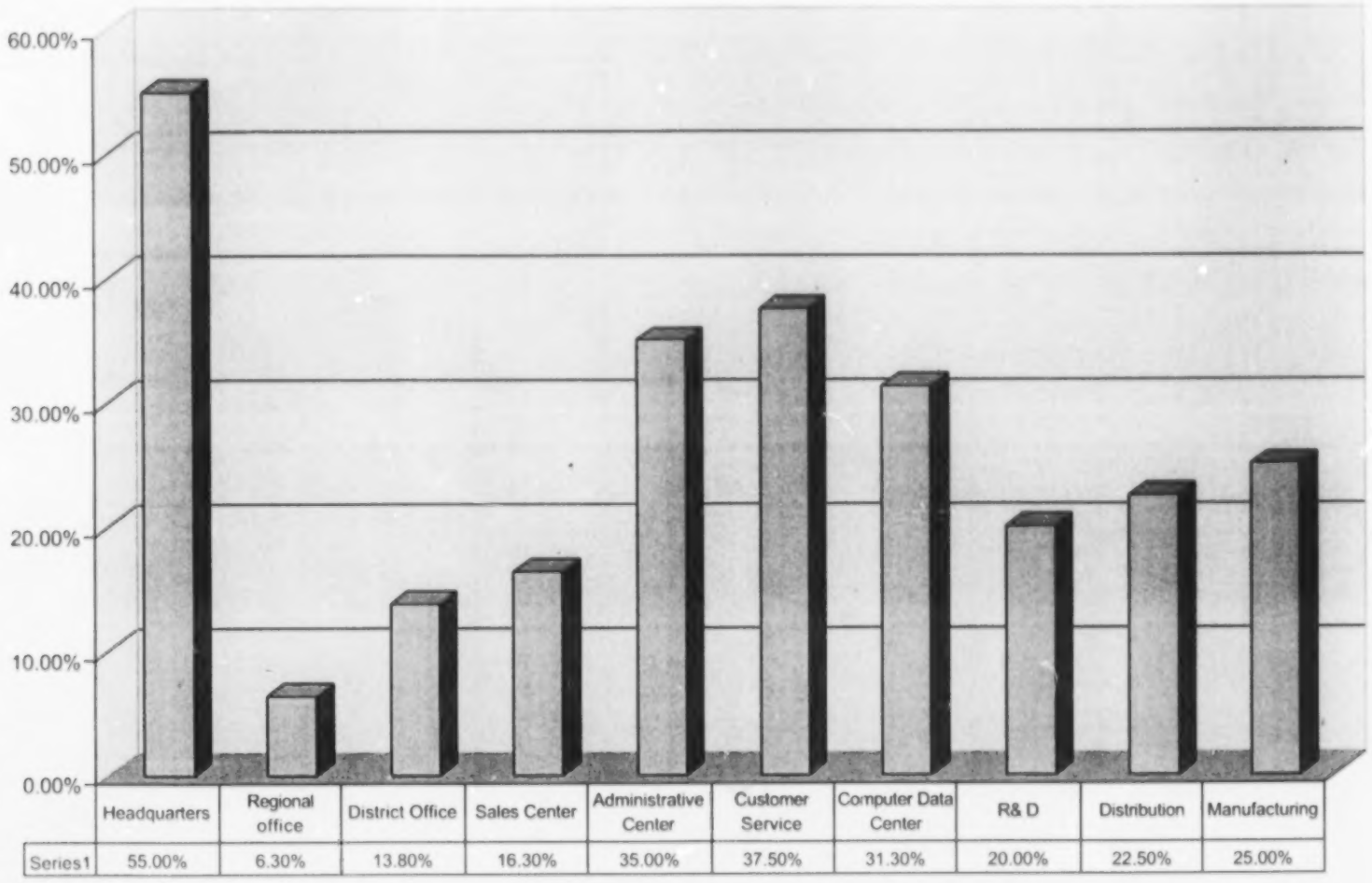
Respondents by Region (Figure 1)



Responses by Organizational Size

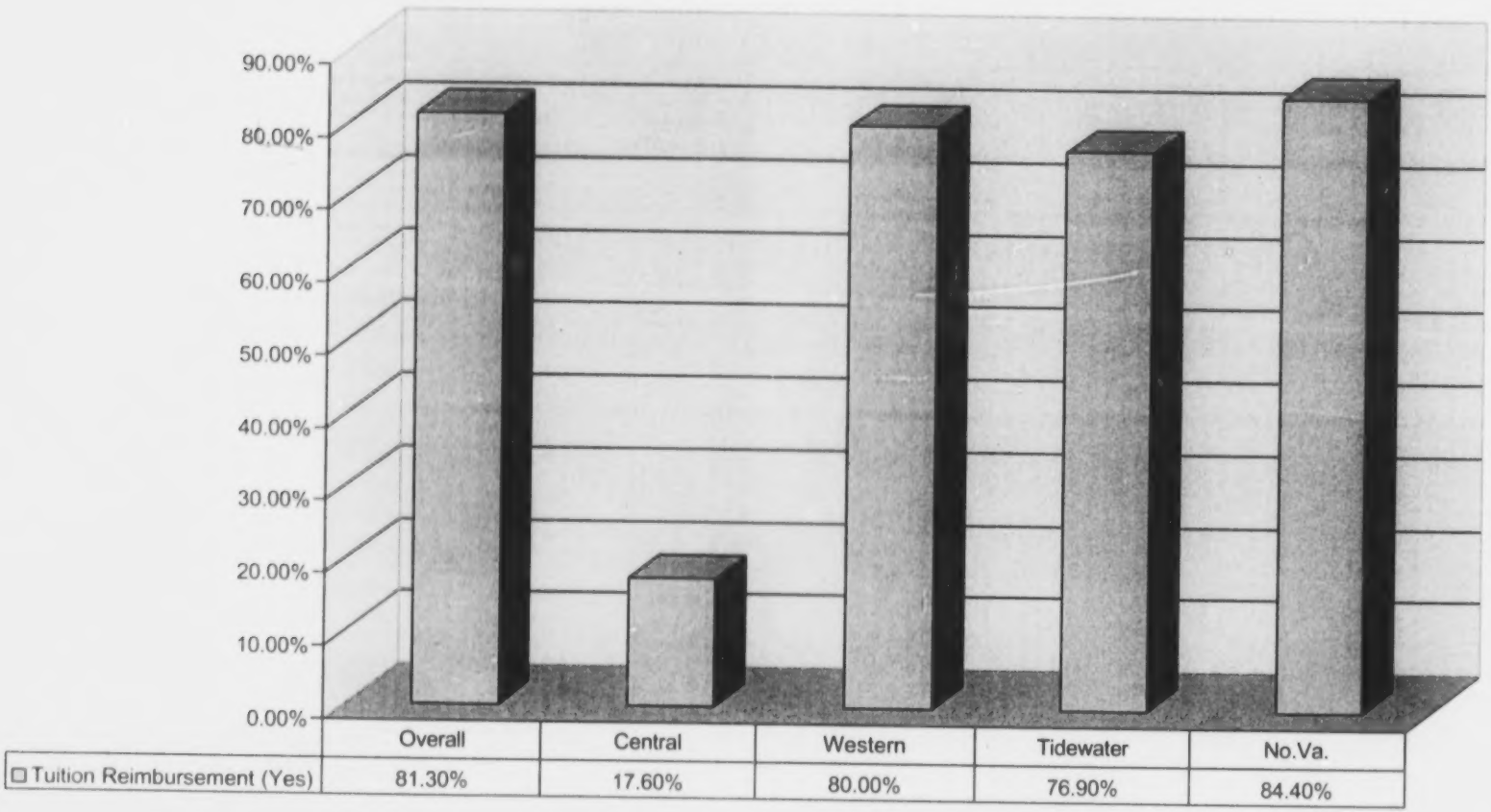


Function (Figure 3)



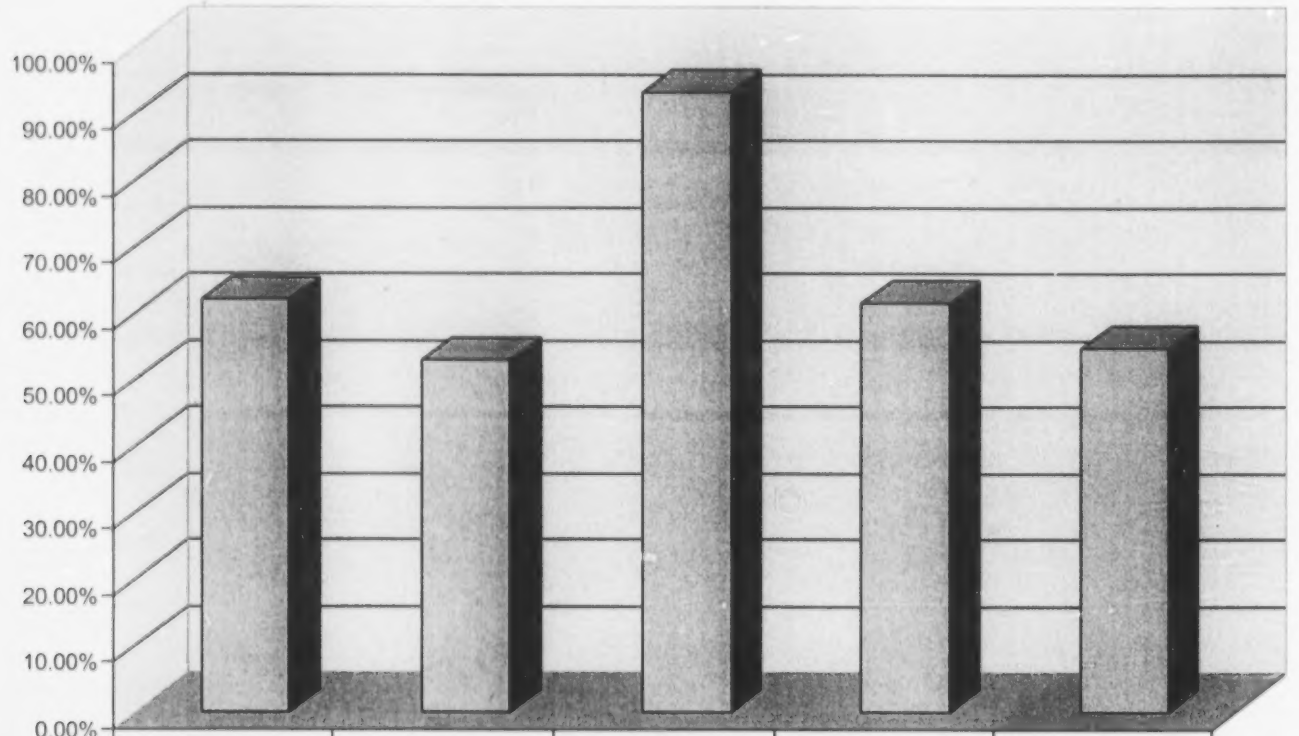
	Headquarters	Regional office	District Office	Sales Center	Administrative Center	Customer Service	Computer Data Center	R& D	Distribution	Manufacturing
Series1	55.00%	6.30%	13.80%	16.30%	35.00%	37.50%	31.30%	20.00%	22.50%	25.00%

Percentage of Tuition Reimbursement (Figure 4)



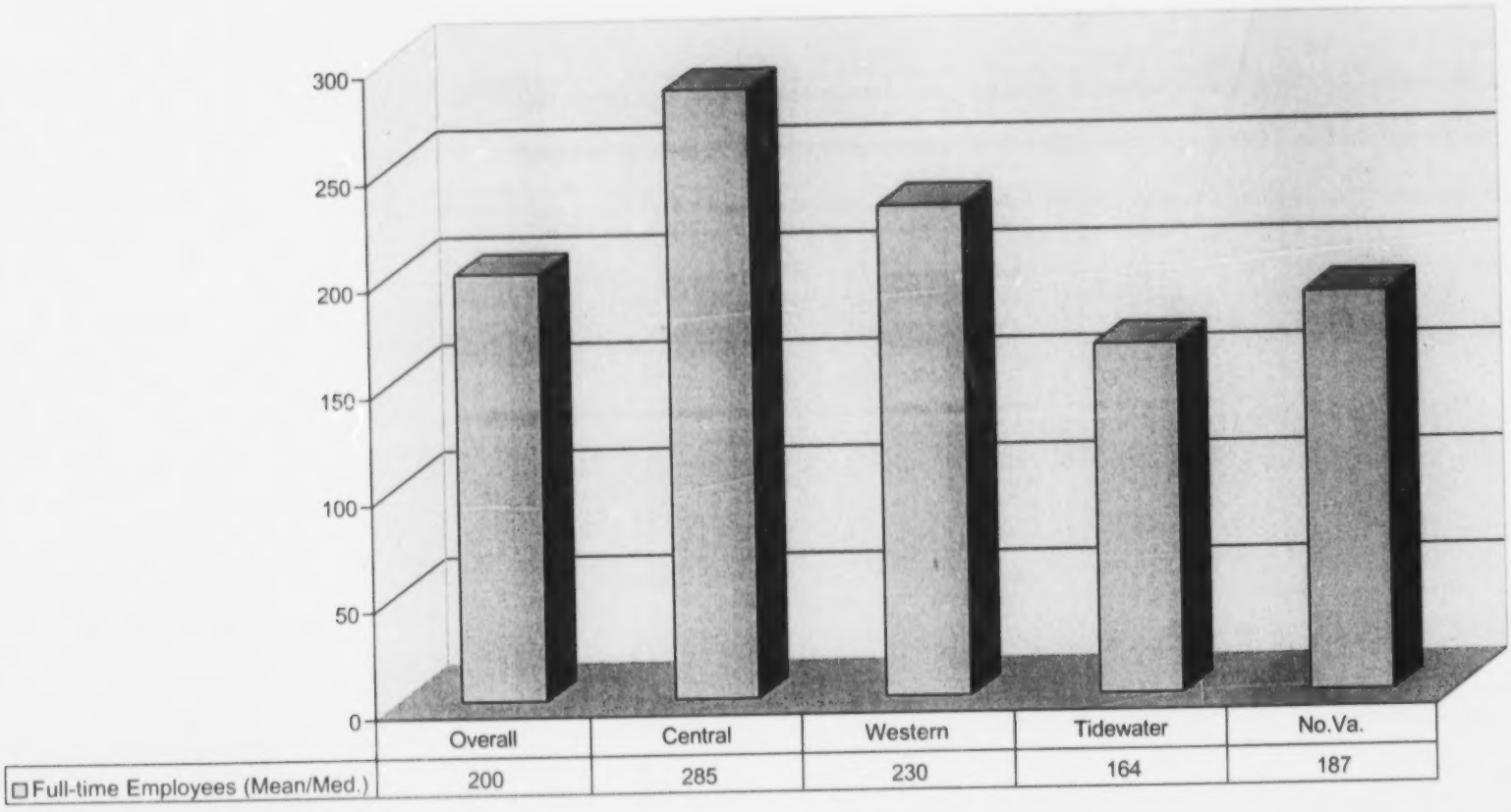
	Overall	Central	Western	Tidewater	No.Va.
Tuition Reimbursement (Yes)	81.30%	17.60%	80.00%	76.90%	84.40%

Pre-Employment Assessessment (Figure 5)

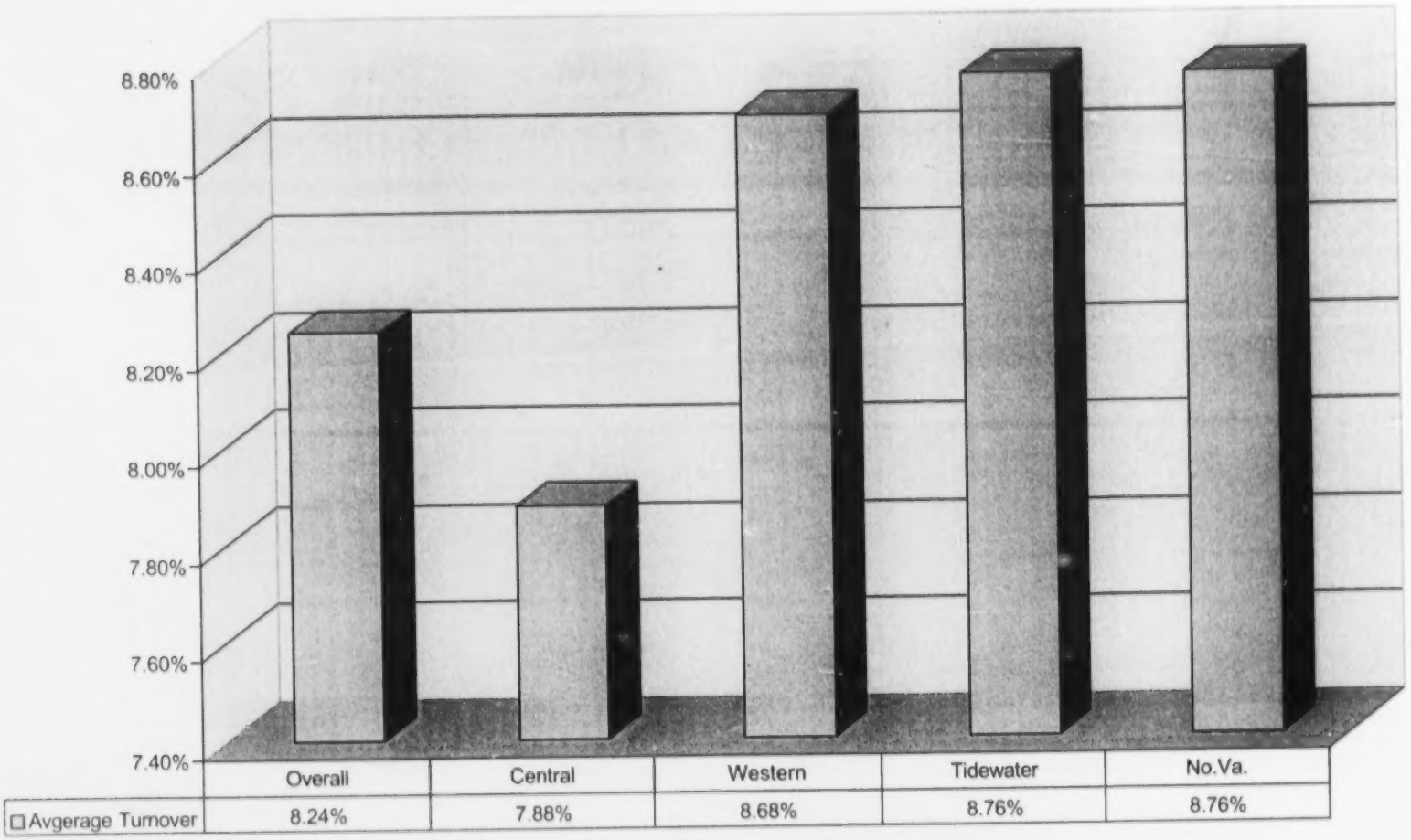


	Overall	Central	Western	Tidewater	No.Va.
Pre-Employment Assess. (Yes)	62.00%	52.90%	93.30%	61.50%	54.80%

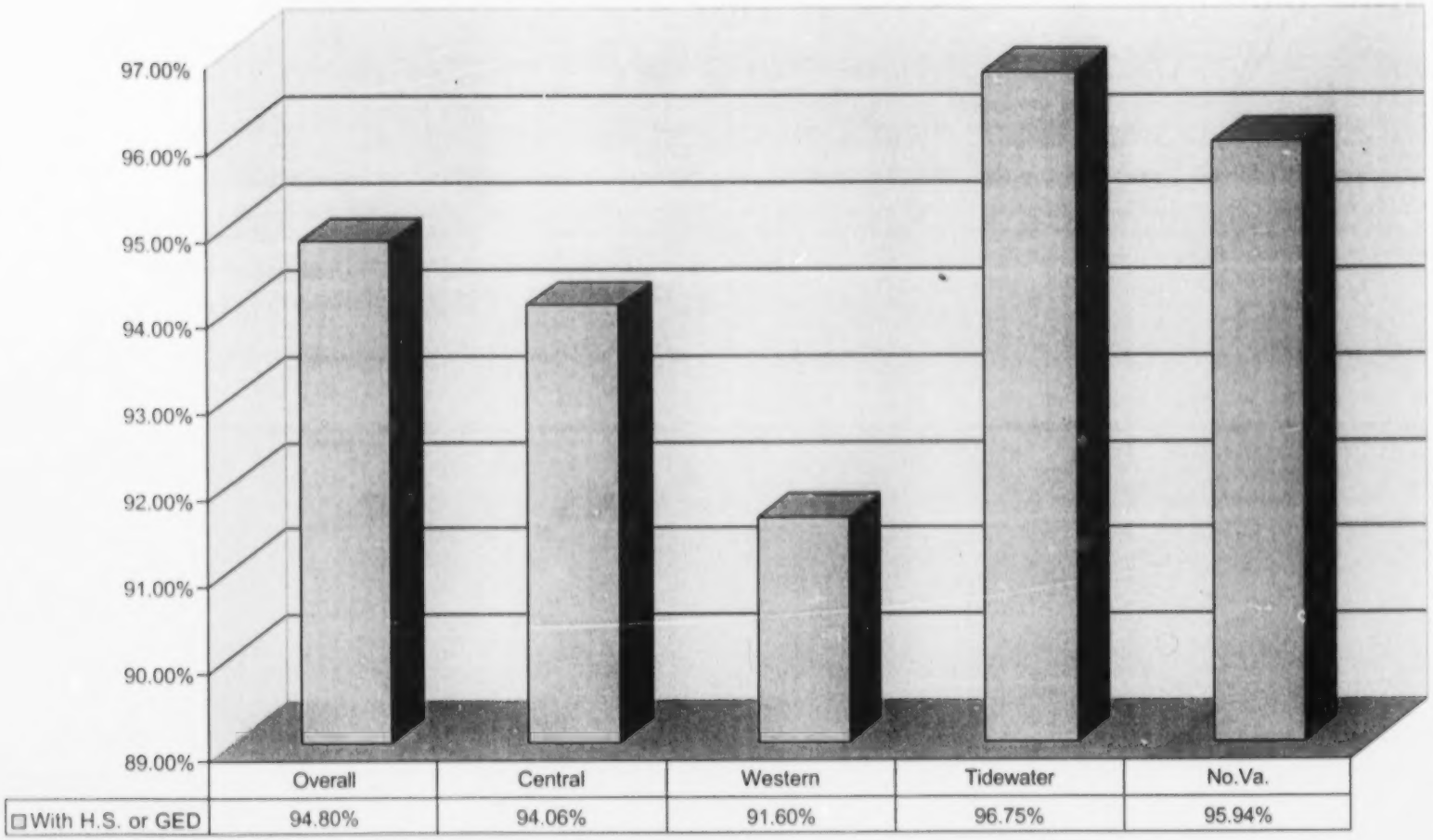
Full-Time Employees (Median) (Figure 6)



Avgerage Turnover (Figure 7)

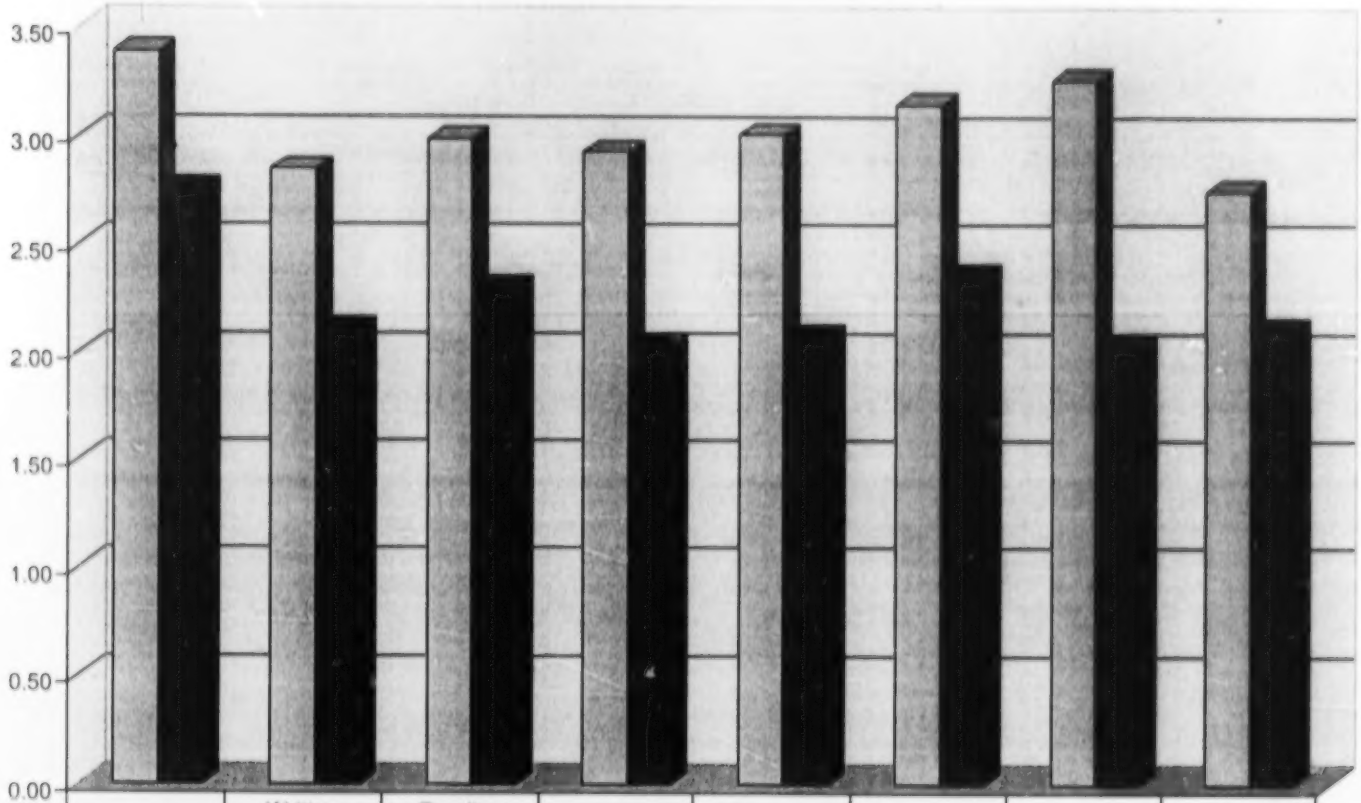


With H.S. or GED (Figure 8)



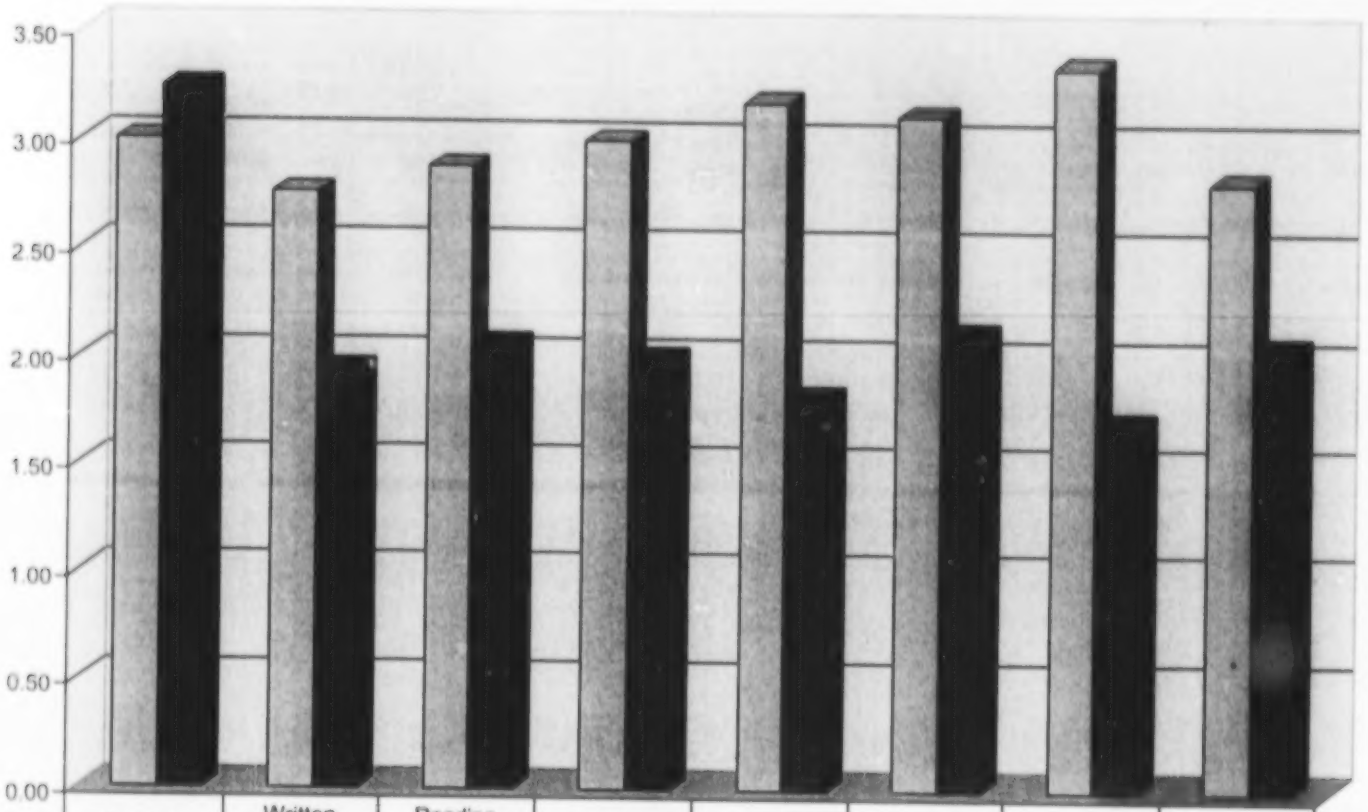
	Overall	Central	Western	Tidewater	No.Va.
With H.S. or GED	94.80%	94.06%	91.60%	96.75%	95.94%

Basic Skills of Employees and Applicants (Figure 9)



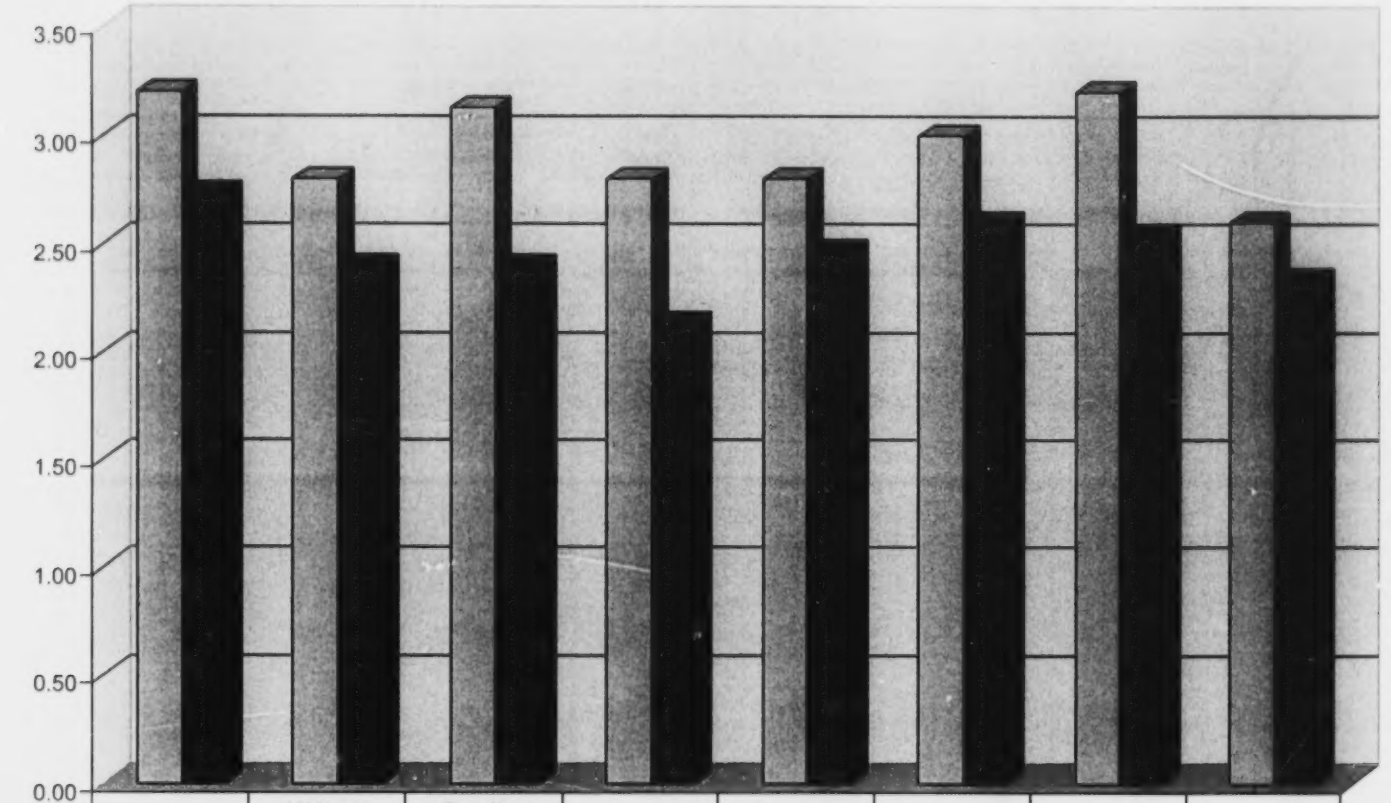
	English	Written Comm.	Reading Comp.	Math	Thinking	Verbal	Team	Computers
Overall Current	3.39	2.85	2.99	2.93	3.01	3.15	3.26	2.75
Overall Applicant	2.76	2.11	2.30	2.03	2.08	2.36	2.03	2.11

Basic Skills - Central Region (Figure 10)



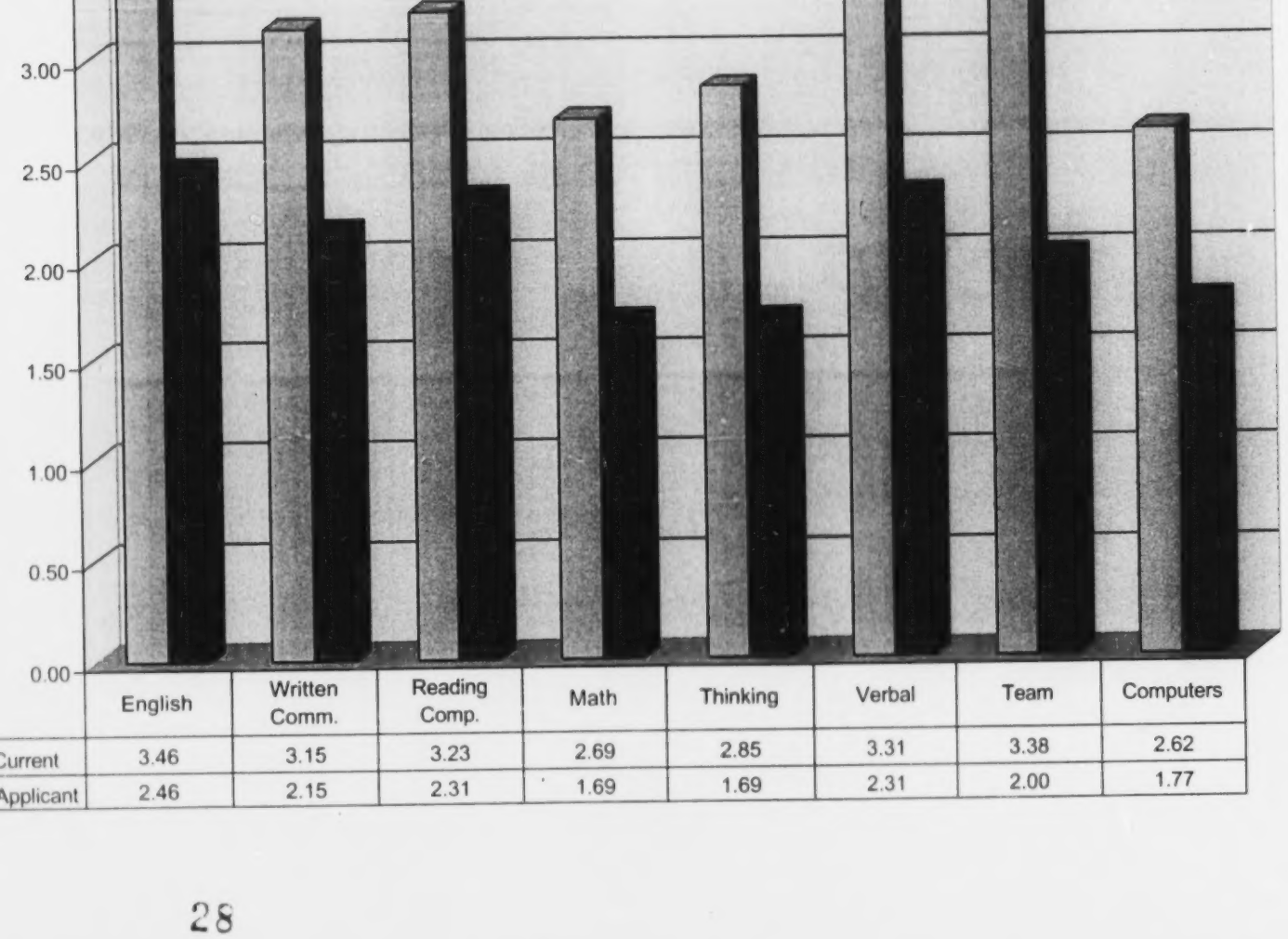
	English	Written Comm.	Reading Comp.	Math	Thinking	Verbal	Team	Computers
Central Current	3.00	2.76	2.88	3.00	3.18	3.12	3.35	2.82
Central Applicant	3.24	1.94	2.06	2.00	1.82	2.12	1.71	2.06

Basic Skills - Western Region (Figure 11)



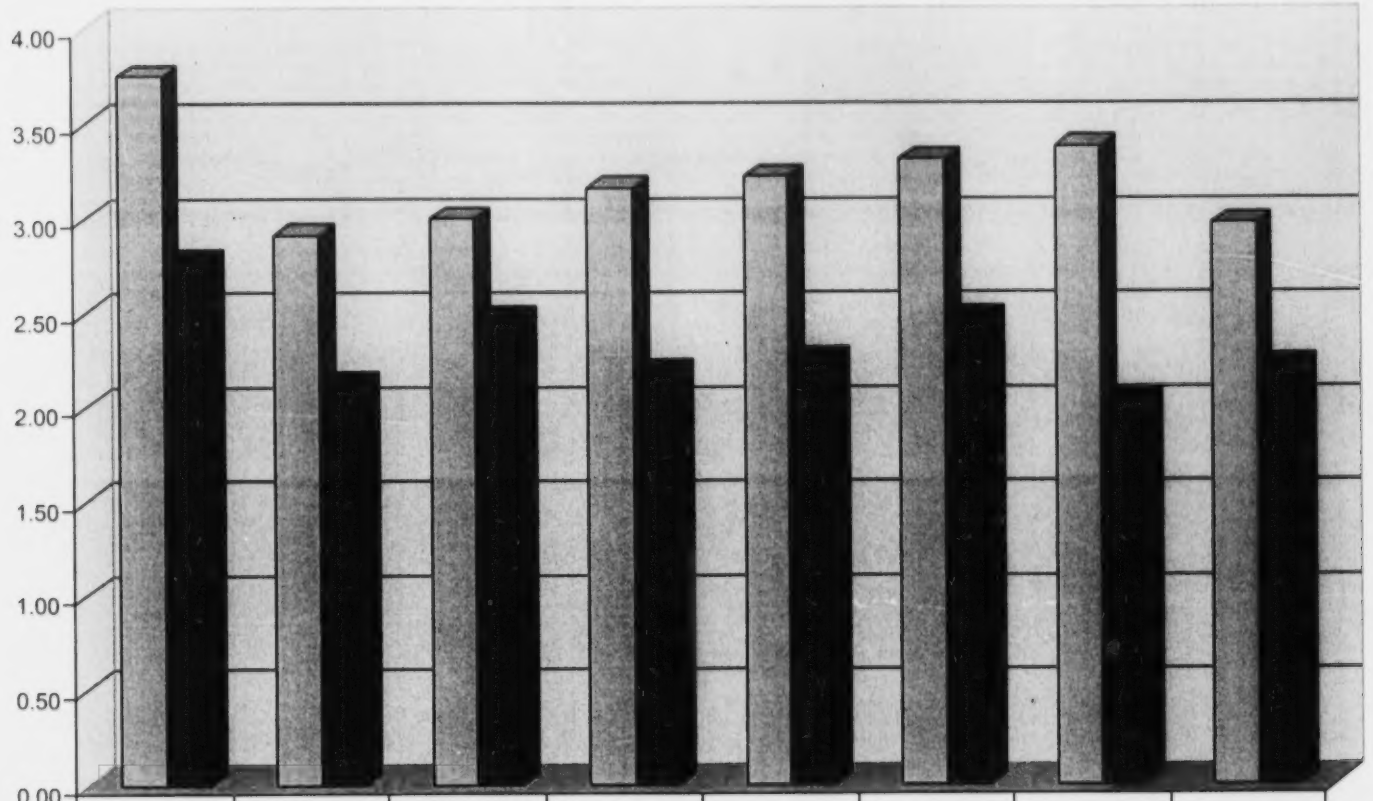
	English	Written Comm.	Reading Comp.	Math	Thinking	Verbal	Team	Computers
Western Current	3.20	2.80	3.13	2.80	2.80	3.00	3.20	2.60
Western Applicant	2.73	2.40	2.40	2.13	2.47	2.60	2.53	2.33

Basic Skills - Tidewater Region (Figure 12)



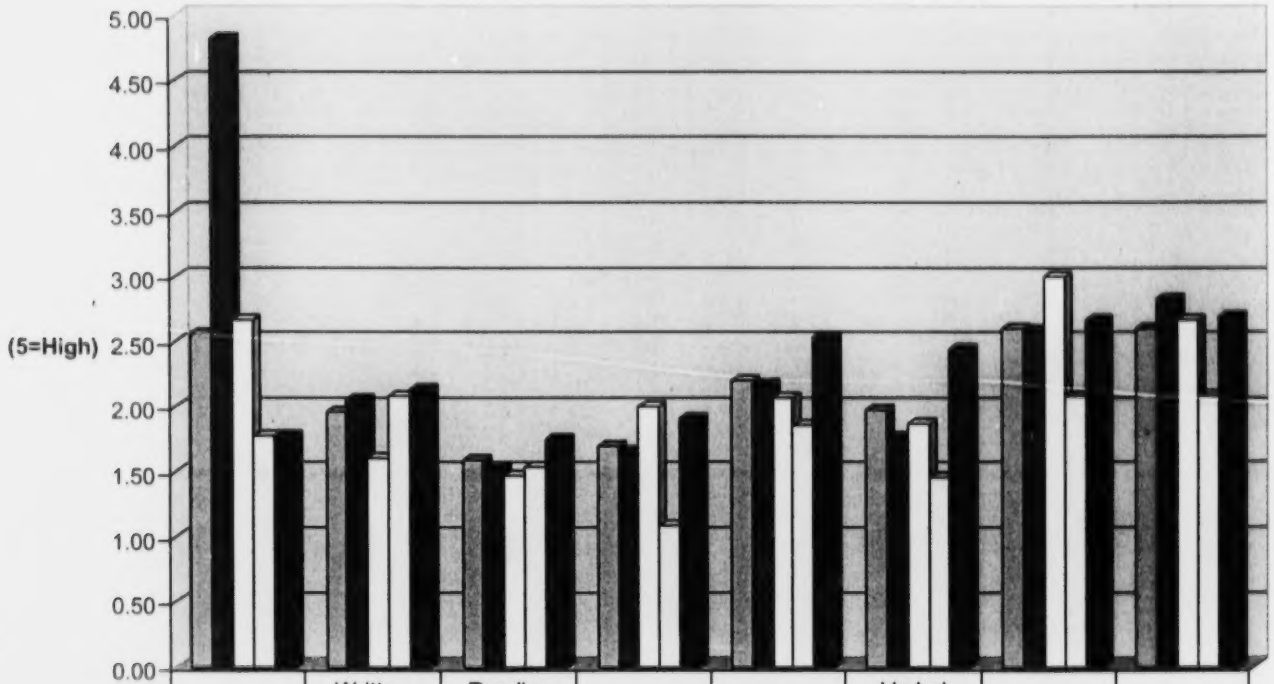
	English	Written Comm.	Reading Comp.	Math	Thinking	Verbal	Team	Computers
Tidewater Current	3.46	3.15	3.23	2.69	2.85	3.31	3.38	2.62
Tidewater Applicant	2.46	2.15	2.31	1.69	1.69	2.31	2.00	1.77

Basic Skills - Norhtern Virginia (Figure 13)



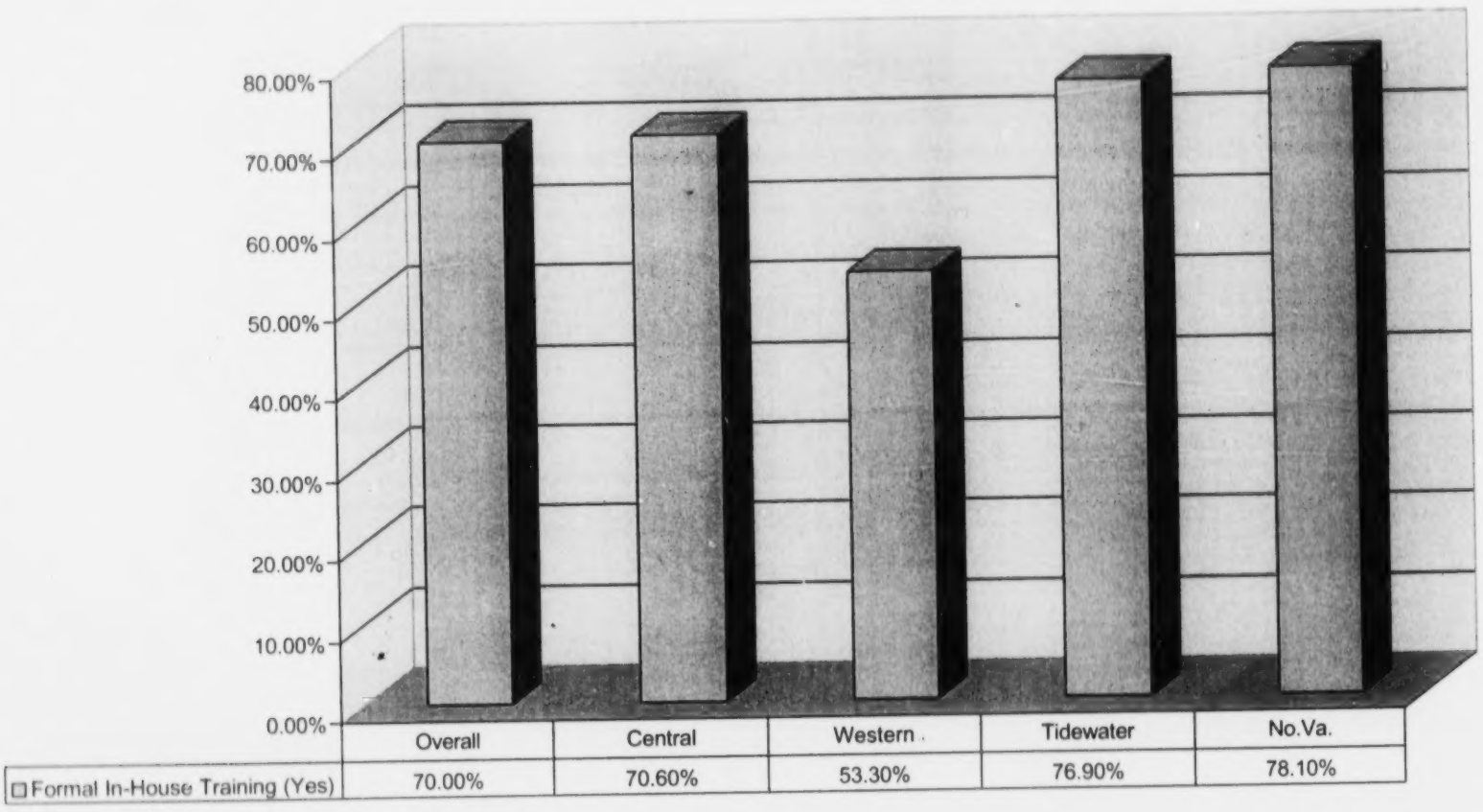
	English	Written Comm.	Reading Comp.	Math	Thinking	Verbal	Team	Computers
☐ No.Va. Current	3.75	2.91	3.00	3.16	3.22	3.31	3.38	2.97
■ No.Va. Applicant	2.78	2.13	2.47	2.19	2.25	2.47	2.03	2.22

Likelihood of Training in Next 24 Months (Figure 14)



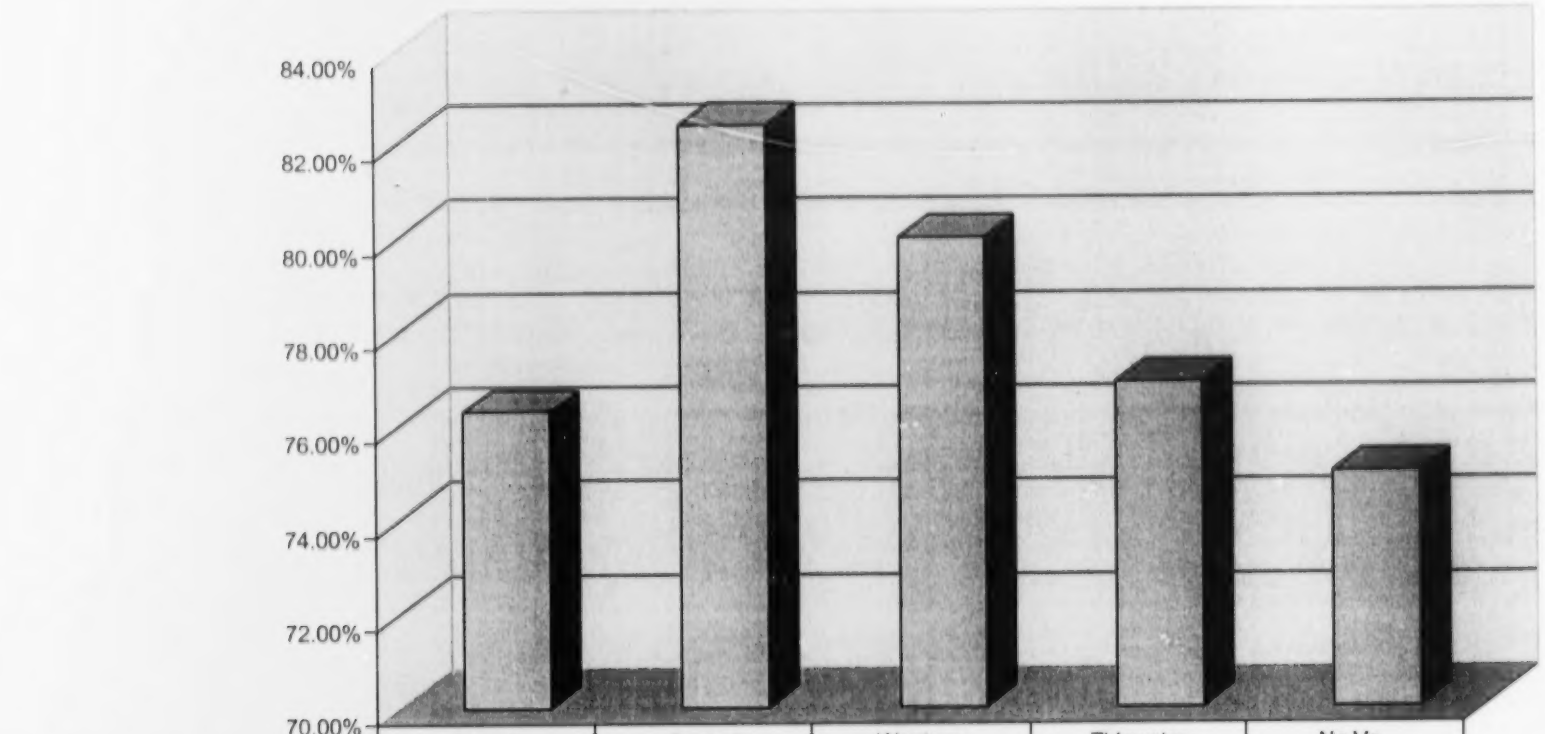
	English	Written Comm	Reading Comp	Math	Thinking	Verbal Comm	Team Skills	Computers
□ Overall	2.56	1.96	1.59	1.70	2.20	1.98	2.60	2.60
■ Central	4.82	2.06	1.53	1.65	2.18	1.76	2.59	2.82
□ Western	2.67	1.60	1.47	2.00	2.07	1.87	3.00	2.67
□ Tidewater	1.77	2.08	1.54	1.08	1.85	1.46	2.08	2 08
■ No.Va.	1.78	2.13	1.75	1.91	2.53	2.44	2.66	2.69

Use of Formal In-House Training (Figure 15)



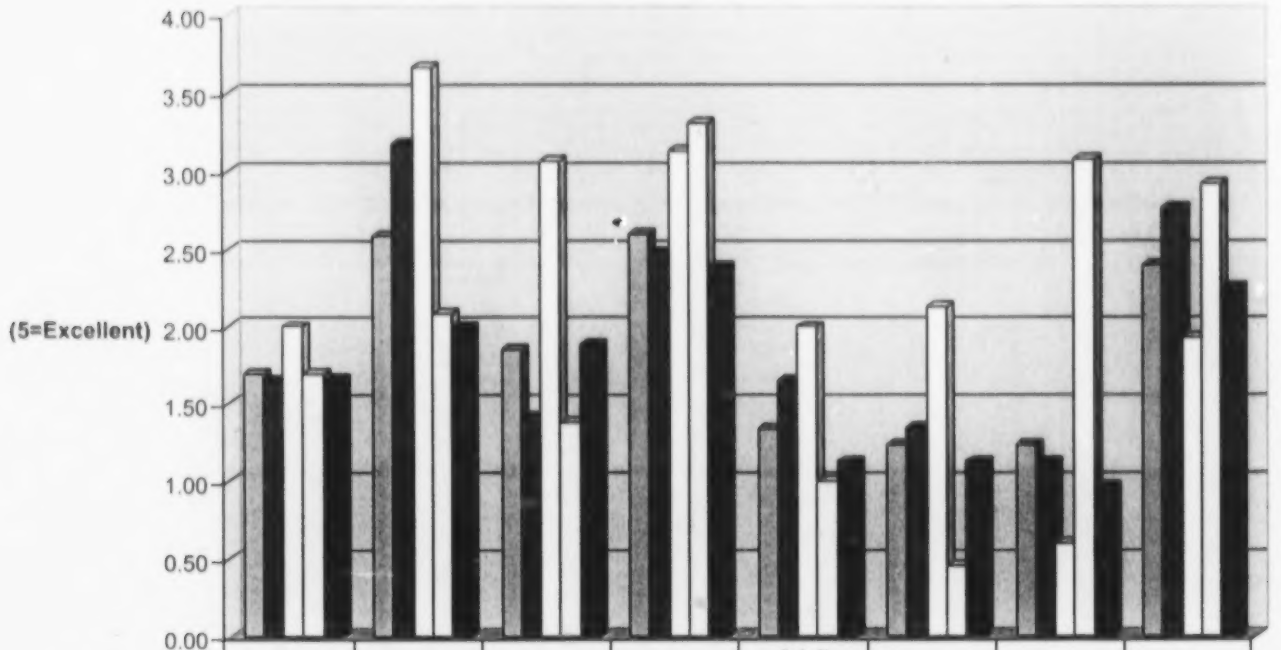
	Overall	Central	Western	Tidewater	No.Va.
Formal In-House Training (Yes)	70.00%	70.60%	53.30%	76.90%	78.10%

Use of Local Training Provider (Figure 16)



	Overall	Central	Western	Tidewater	No.Va.
Use Local Training Provider (Yes)	76.30%	82.40%	80.00%	76.90%	75.00%

Quality of Local Training and Educational Services (Figure 17)



	High School	Community College	Technical Center	Colleges & Univ.	Adult Learning Ctr	GED or Equivalent	Literacy Providers	Private Vendors
Overall	1.69	2.59	1.85	2.60	1.34	1.24	1.24	2.40
Central	1.65	3.18	1.41	2.47	1.65	1.35	1.12	2.76
Western	2.00	3.67	3.07	3.13	2.00	2.13	0.60	1.93
Tidewater	1.69	2.08	1.38	3.31	1.00	0.46	3.08	2.92
No.Va.	1.66	2.00	1.88	2.38	1.13	1.13	0.97	2.25

Impact of Local Business Climate (Next 24 Months) (Figure 18)